

Working to Bring Transparency to Congress

Too often in this Congress, controversial bills are voted on hours after being introduced in the House or Senate. There is no time for members of Congress to read the bills, let alone understand what is in them. Furthermore, there is no chance for anyone — whether they are a policy expert or interested citizen — to weigh in on the legislation. The fact is, the current Democratic Leadership conducts most business behind closed doors, and they pass legislation in haste. These are not small, inconsequential bills either. We are talking about billions of dollars in spending and legislation that will fundamentally change our nation for generations. I do not believe this is how sound legislation should be crafted, nor do I believe this is how the people's business should be conducted.

For example, in recent months, Congress has passed rushed and flawed legislation which drastically expands the government, raises taxes, and intrudes on our free-market system. This legislation included a \$787 billion "stimulus" bill which was made available to members of Congress only a few hours before it was considered for a vote with limited amendments. What little opportunity I had to read this bill before it was voted on, concerned me because I did not think it could actually create the jobs that its proponents were claiming. My concerns have been proven correct, and our nation now has higher unemployment with \$787 billion in new debt for our grandchildren.

The point is, no lawmaker should have to rely on intuition to vote on legislation of this magnitude. Every Member should have adequate time to analyze comprehensive legislation that will affect every American before voting on it. The mistakes made with the stimulus probably could have been avoided if there had been time to analyze, discuss and amend this bill. The same process applied to government bailouts, including the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act and the Auto Industry Financing and Restructuring Act, as well as climate change legislation that enacted a cap-and-tax system that raises our energy costs.

Frustration with this dynamic is not reserved to Republicans. Congressman Brian Baird (D-WA) has introduced H.Res. 554, which would amend the Rules of the House of Representatives to require that legislation and conference reports be available on the Internet for 72 hours before consideration by the House. In other words, this Resolution would give Members sufficient time to at least read the text. I am a cosponsor of this legislation with 211 other Members, because I believe that a more transparent government begins with providing you the opportunity to give your opinion on a piece of legislation, before it comes up for a vote.

Nonetheless, I think we need to go a step further. President Barack Obama made declarations that his administration would be the most open and transparent ever, saying, In fact, the President said he would actually broadcast all the deliberations on health care for the American people: "That's what I will do in bringing all parties together, not negotiating behind closed doors, but bringing all parties together, and broadcasting those negotiations on C-SPAN so that the American people can see what the choices are."

But today as the debate over health-care reform continues, it does so from behind closed doors. An editorial from Roll Call, calls the secrecy of the proceedings "disturbing" saying:

"All of a sudden, we don't know what's being done — or when, or by whom. The secrecy of the proceedings, particularly given where we've come from in the previous few months, is disturbing

— as is the lack of diversity in voices shaping the final product. There are no Republicans in the room. If any other members of Congress have been invited to participate, we’ll never know it. …The sudden silence from the Senate seems like a slap at all the stakeholders who have invested so much in the health care debate — not to mention the taxpayers who will be asked to foot the bill for whatever reform plan does get adopted.”

To increase transparency in the health care debate, the GOP Doctors Caucus is hosting a hearing today to examine what physicians and economic experts think about the impact of health care legislation put forth by Congressional Leadership in the House of Representatives and Senate. Former Congressional Budget Office (CBO) Director Douglas Holtz-Eakin, Spokesman for the Coalition of State and Specialty Societies Dr. Todd Williamson, and Dr. Jerry Miller from Holston Medical Group in Kingsport will all be testifying during this important hearing.